

Singing our own praises: *The Whistler* celebrates 20 years of publication

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While 2026 marks the 50th anniversary of the Hunter Bird Observers Club (HBOC), it is also the 20th anniversary of the club's journal *The Whistler*. Within Australia, the premier journal for original academic ornithological research is *Emu – Austral Ornithology*. Journals such as *Australian Field Ornithology*, *Corella* and *Stilt*, all published by national organisations or groups, also play important roles in documenting original research, behavioural studies, field studies and observations of national significance.

Some State birding organisations also publish their own journals, such as *Sunbird* in Queensland or *South Australian Ornithologist*, but HBOC's journal *The Whistler* is the only peer-reviewed journal published by a local bird club in Australia. Our journal publishes original research and observations that focus on the ecology and behaviour of birds in the Hunter Region. All articles that contain original research are peer-reviewed. This note describes the history of the journal and some of its achievements.

The origins of *The Whistler* date back to the early 2000s when the HBOC Management Committee decided the club should publish details of members' bird studies to enable accessibility of information to the wider community. It was also anticipated the documentation and publication of this information would provide support for HBOC submissions in response to development proposals in the Hunter Region that had the potential to adversely impact critical bird habitat.

The first edition of 51 pages was published in 2007, with eight articles. It was edited by Liz Date-Huxtable, with the support of a Publications Subcommittee. The journal's selected title and emblem drew inspiration from one of our region's most iconic species, the Australian Golden Whistler. Harold Tarrant and Mike Newman were joint editors from 2008 to 2018, and were succeeded by Neil Fraser and Alan Stuart who have steered it through a further eight issues (thus far). Recent editions now have up to 100 pages, with 15 or more articles. While most of the articles are from HBOC

members, contributions relevant to Hunter Region birdlife are welcomed from all authors with an interest in our region's birds.

So, how can one objectively judge the success or otherwise of *The Whistler*? One measure is the number of articles that are cited by other researchers. I obtained information about citations of articles in *The Whistler* by carrying out a series of searches using Google Scholar. A complete listing is presented in an Appendix to this article (available online at <https://www.hboc.org.au/the-whistler-volume-20/>). While the majority of citations are by other *Whistler* authors, *Whistler* articles have been cited 142 times by authors in other journals, around half of which are published overseas. Citations in more prominent Australian journals include *Emu – Austral Ornithology* two articles; *Australian Field Ornithology* 30 articles, *Stilt* 15 articles and *Corella* 13 articles. Ten articles have also been cited in the theses of Honours, Masters and Doctor of Philosophy candidates in Australia, Canada and the United Kingdom.

In its 20 issues, *The Whistler* has published 236 articles from over 100 authors, many of whom had not previously published a scientific article. Most of the articles fall into three categories; long-term studies, single species studies, and short notes. Long-term studies comprise around one quarter of *The Whistler's* articles. These provide information on local and regional population trends, assess ecosystem health and help guide conservation policy. Adam Fawcett's article on threatened species management in local state forests (*The Whistler* 20) and Mike Newman's article on Varied Sittella (*The Whistler* 9) are examples.

Studies on single species also comprise another quarter of the articles. These provide details of species population and behaviour in a variety of habitats on a scale that is not achievable in high-level publications such as the Bird Atlases. Of note amongst these are a series of five articles by Kim Pryor (*The Whistler* 16, 17, 18, 19 and 20) documenting the results of a long-term study which

is providing new insights into the nesting and parenting behaviour of Galahs.

Another quarter of the articles are short notes documenting new, unusual or infrequently encountered observations of birds' foraging, roosting and breeding behaviour. These types of contributions are strongly encouraged as they are less technically challenging to write and frequently provide an ideal starting point for novice authors. They can also record significant new information for some species. A recent article by Mick Roderick and Michele Keith on Spangled Drongo nesting at the Hunter Wetlands Centre documented a significant southern extension of the species' breeding range (*The Whistler* 20).

Articles reviewing the status of single species in the region form a small but important category. Species documented include Black Falcon, Pink-eared Duck, Bassian and Russet-tailed Thrushes, Fairy Martin, Varied Sittella, Pallid Cuckoo, Sooty Oystercatcher, Grey-tailed Tattler, Australian Painted-snipe, Bush Stone-curlew, Double-banded Plover, White-fronted Chat and Latham's Snipe. Many of these species are threatened. Most of the articles are based upon long-term studies and identify regional population trends. They have been used to inform Government authorities and advocacy groups charged with developing and delivering conservation programmes. An article on Latham's Snipe counts in Irrawang Swamp by the late Max Maddock and Mike Newman (*The Whistler* 12) was cited in the 2020 Action Plan for Australian Birds (CSIRO Publishing). It was also cited by the Department of Natural Resources and Environment, Tasmania, in developing a listing statement for the species in that state.

A series of seven articles by Alan Stuart, Mike Newman, Rob Kyte and others (*The Whistler* 5, 6, 13, 14, 15 and 16) documenting the development of monitoring techniques, and the behaviour and population status of the Rufous Scrub-bird on the Barrington Tops, comprise the bulk of the published contemporary research on this cryptic, endangered and rapidly declining species. Two of these articles are cited in the 2020 Action Plan for Australian Birds (CSIRO Publishing).

Several recently published books cite articles from *The Whistler*. Articles about Black Falcons, Brown Falcons, Peregrine Falcons, Black Kites, Brahminy Kites, Nankeen Kestrels and White-bellied Sea Eagles, by multiple authors, have been cited in three of Steve Debus' books published by CSIRO Publishing; Australian Eagles and Eagle-like birds

(2017), Birds of prey of Australia, A Field Guide, Third Edition (2019), and Australian Falcons, Ecology, Behaviour and Conservation (2022). An article by Mick Roderick about White-bellied Sea Eagle foraging (*The Whistler* 8) is cited by Michael Campbell in his book The Great Eagles, their Evolution, Ecology and Conservation (2022), published by CRC Press. Joseph Forshaw and Frank Knight's book Quail, Buttonquail and Plains-wanderer in Australia and New Zealand (2023), (CSIRO Publishing), cites an article by Rob Kyte and Mike Newman (*The Whistler* 7), and Frank Lambert's book Pittas, Broadbills and Asities, Second Edition (2023) (Bloomsbury Publishing) cites another article by Rob Kyte (*The Whistler* 11).

The Whistler can also claim the bragging rights for publishing a number of birding 'firsts' in the region and within Australia. Foremost amongst these is the publication of the first modern record of Pycroft's Petrel in Australia, on Broughton Island, by Alan Stuart and Tom Clarke (*The Whistler* 17). Other articles describing 'firsts' for the Hunter Region include a short note by Peter Alexander documenting the first breeding record for Black Falcon at Martindale (*The Whistler* 10), a short note by Dick Jenkins recording the first breeding record for Red-chested Buttonquail at Parraweena (*The Whistler* 18), and an article by Adam Fawcett, Ian Benson and Mick Roderick describing the first record of a Red-tailed Tropicbird sighted over Newcastle Harbour (*The Whistler* 18).

In addition to the previously mentioned article on Spangled Drongos, three further articles document the first local breeding records for other species that are extending their southern range. An article by Trevor Murray (*The Whistler* 13) which documented the first breeding record of Beach Stone-curlew on Dowadee Island, Port Stephens, demonstrated a significant southern extension of the species' breeding range and was cited in the 2020 Action Plan for Australian Birds (CSIRO Publishing). Lois Wooding documented a similar range extension for Brahminy Kite nesting at Lemon Tree Passage (*The Whistler* 11). The range extension of the Black-necked Stork into the region and its nesting in the Tomago Wetland and Hexham Swamp has been extensively documented by Ann Lindsey and Rob Kyte (*The Whistler* 13, 14, 17 and 20). These three species now breed regularly in the Hunter Region.

As well as providing a repository of knowledge for researchers studying local birds, HBOC has cited articles from the journal to support submissions objecting to development proposals that would

result in the degradation or loss of important local avian habitat. These include submissions regarding the T4 project to expand the Kooragang Coal Terminal in Newcastle Harbour in 2012 and the proposed expansion of Soldiers Point Marina in 2013 and 2015. Trevor Murray's article documenting the breeding of the Critically Endangered Beach Stone-curlew on adjacent Dowadee Island (*The Whistler* 13) was instrumental in providing a justification for the latter project's rejection.

There are many factors that contribute to the success of *The Whistler*. Foremost amongst them is the Hunter Region itself which hosts the largest and most diverse number of bird species in Australia. Over 450 species, around one half of all Australian species, including 58 pelagic species, are either resident or have been recorded here. The region's two major estuaries, the Hunter River and Port Stephens, are the two most important locations for migratory and endemic shorebird species in New South Wales, supporting internationally and nationally significant populations of some species. Consequently, the region attracts the interests of a diverse range of researchers, conservation organisations, birding enthusiasts and twitchers.

The close links maintained by HBOC and its members to researchers at the University of Newcastle, state authorities (National Parks and Wildlife Services, Local Land Services, Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water), local environmental consulting groups, and the national bird advocacy organisation BirdLife Australia, are also important. Numerous articles have been authored by students and staff of these organisations.

The most important asset supporting all research in the Hunter Region is the meticulously kept HBOC records that extend back to its inception in 1976, and the ongoing effort by members to document local species today. The Birds Australia (now BirdLife Australia) project "The New Atlas of Australian Birds" from 1998-2002 and the subsequent decision to maintain the Atlas as an ongoing project (now Birddata), provided the incentive for many club members to get involved in bird surveying and to document their findings. The club's monthly surveys of the Hunter and Port Stephens estuaries provide an opportunity for members to gain experience in acquisition of population data within a systematic framework. Since its inception, over 114,000 Birddata surveys have been recorded in the Hunter Region covering all coastal, inland, mountain forest and offshore areas. Since 1993, all of the club's and individual member's records have been analysed, summarised and published in HBOC's Annual Bird Report.

As *The Whistler* continues to grow, and the number of published articles increases, the amount of information available to researchers on birds of the Hunter Region also increases. The journal is now cross-referenced in international ornithological libraries ensuring availability to a world-wide audience of researchers and readers. It is well placed to continue to be a successful vehicle for the dissemination of research and knowledge of our local birds into the future.